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**Abstract:** Edgar Allan Poe is considered by many critics as one of the most known figures of the first half of the nineteenth century. A purely romantic man and closely linked to his European contemporaries. The influence of his works has been found in many authors after his death, becoming part of today's existing cultural canon. Therefore, this essay will seek not only to perform an analysis of the unreliable narrator in Poe's work, but also to search and make a comparison with the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, who was not only a Poe translator, but also a big fan of him. The work of Julio Cortázar will be framed within a Gothic perspective in addition to fitting some of his works under the same point of view as Poe's unreliable narrator, trying to find the influence of Edgar Allan Poe in the stories of Julio Cortázar without making a one-to-one comparison between both of them.

**Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, Julio Cortázar, Gothic Literature, Unreliable Narrator, Comparison

**Guillermo ALONSO MENCHERO**

**A Black Cat in Cortázar's Works: comparison Between Julio Cortázar and Edgar Allan Poe**

**0. Introduction**

Edgar Allan Poe is considered by far as one of the most important figures of the literature production of the nineteenth century (Garrison 137). A purely romantic man and closely linked to his European contemporaries. His biological parents died when he was just three years old and was adopted by a wealthy couple residing in Virginia. There he would attend college, although he had to leave soon because of his debts with gambling. When he was twenty-seven years old there was an event that would change the meaning of the course of his work: the marriage to Virginia Clemm. She was his cousin, and she was thirteen at the time of the wedding. Despite the gossip of the people, it was a happy marriage that would never be consummated. When Virginia was nineteen years old, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. This caused Poe to enter a state of anxiety and depression that he tried to fight through alcohol. (Patterson 1247). He produced many of his darkest and death-bound poems in those years, such as "The Raven." His anxiety and depression was on the rise until his wife died in 1847 due to tuberculosis. In 1848 there was the author's first suicide attempt and his last published work: *Eureka*. After this, Poe fell into a spiral of alcohol and opium that culminated on October 3rd, 1849, when he was found on the street, in a state of delirium and very scared, wearing some clothes that did not belong to him. Newspapers of the time reported that Poe's death (October 7<sup>th</sup>) was due to cerebral "congestion" or "inflammation," the euphemism that was used on that time for deaths that were caused by embarrassing reasons, such as alcoholism (Silverman 435).

The fact that, a large part of the events of his life, such as whether his marriage was consummated or not or even his own mysterious death, or that the answers are mere speculations involve Poe in a halo of mystery. This halo can be extrapolated to his works, marked by a dark theme and a series of first-person narrators who sometimes lack credibility according to the circumstances in which they are presented.

**1. From Poe to Cortázar**

The term Unreliable Narrator was coined by literary critic Wayne C. Booth, although according to narrative theorist Peter J. Rabinowitz, Booth's definition falls short. Rabinowitz writes:

An unreliable narrator however, is not simply a narrator who 'does not tell the truth' – what fictional narrator ever tells the literal truth? Rather an unreliable narrator is one who tells lies, conceals information, misjudges with respect to the narrative audience – that is, one whose statements are untrue not by the standards of the real world or of the authorial audience but by the standards of his own narrative audience. ... In other words, all fictional narrators are false in that they are imitations. But some are imitations who tell the truth, some of people who lie. (134)

Taking into account this definition and based on the fact that the narrator can become a barrier to the information received from the text in question, in this essay, the figure of the narrators will be analysed in some works of Poe and the credibility of them to relate it with the writings of the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, as well as the similarities in between both writers.

The first case to be analysed as an unreliable narrator in Poe's work will be "A Tell-Tale Heart." In this work Poe presents a narrator who has been accused of suffering madness: "True! —nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them" (Poe 799). This narrator is often unable to distinguish what is real from what is not. At the beginning of the short story he talks about his sharpened senses; but soon his paranoia makes a dent in him until the end of the story, where the limits of reality, guilt and the unreal become blurred to definitively confirm the madness of the character. The position in which it leaves the reader accordingly is that of the assumption of real information. Everything is received from the environment (being a homodiegetic narrator), it goes through the inside of his mind, like a filter, before reaching the reader.

A similar situation is behind *The Oval Portrait*. In this short story, the narrator has the need to spend the night in an abandoned castle because he is seriously injured and there is no way to clarify what is the origin for his condition. The man is practically unable to enter on his own and the narration of the story behind the portrait begins when once the night falls, he is unable to sleep. Consequently, the thread that must be followed and kept in mind in the reading is the fact that the narrator, again in the first person, is seriously injured. And all the information he provides us is affected by his perception of reality.

At this point it is necessary to perform an analysis of a third short story by Edgar Allan Poe: *The Cask of Amontillado*. Here it is used again a first-person narrator, but there is a particularity with respect to previous narrators and it is his state of consciousness. Montresor is presented as a very intelligent and heartless person who offers witty dialogue getting the reader to empathize with him despite the fact that he will lock Fortunato with the intention of avenging himself for a past offense. But to what extent can the reader of Montresor's words be trusted? In line to this question, in *The Cask of Amontillado* there are several elements that must be taken into consideration related to the credibility of Montresor. The first is the temporal factor. The story is told in past tense, like the rest of those that have been previously mentioned with the difference that in this one it can be known exactly how much time have passed, as Poe wrote: "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them" (1034). Then a second element appears, the idea of revenge. At the beginning of the work, Montresor justifies his actions by mentioning the thousand injuries of Fortunato (1028) he had borne. However, the reasons that lead him to commit the murder remain foreign to the reader. All the jokes and comments that Fortunato makes throughout his descent through the winery are perceived as negative and can make the reader feel offended, or think that Fortunato is a fool..., why? Because we receive it from the perspective of Montresor, someone who does not show a moment of scruple along the murder (Dern 63). An important

point when it comes to deal with Montresor's credibility issue is the reliability of his confession. It is known that the story is being told half a century later and it could be assumed that the last three words of the story are spoken by a third person, perhaps a priest giving him the last rites. "In pace requiescat!" Thompson writes that "*The Cask of Amontillado* involves a confessional element, among a first-person narrator, like Montresor, seems calmly or gleefully to recount horrible deeds, but which generally implies a listener to whom the agonized soul is revealing his torment.

The next story to be mentioned as an exemplification of the unreliability of Poe's narrator is *The Black Cat*. On this occasion a voice whose experience lacks credibility appears again. The narrator does not seek to justify some facts, he simply recounts some events of such magnitude that he does not even trust his senses. "For the wildest, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence" (763). From the beginning he makes a warning, everything read below should be treated with care and not to be trusted. Thus, the narrator tells the story and it is understood that his alcoholism (quite similar to that suffered by Poe (Rachman 24), is what has led him to enter a spiral of violence. But also, alcohol should be understood as one of the causes that generate the lack of credibility. In addition to that, the man fervently assures from his cell that he is not crazy, however the obsession with Pluto and the other cat seems to be the catalysts of his violence.

At this point of the essay I will proceed with the comparison between Edgar Allan Poe and Julio Cortázar, taking into account what has been previously seen about the credibility of the narrator and the bases of the Gothic fiction. We must start from the basis that literature is not an isolated phenomenon and authors know the work of their contemporaries and previous writers (Barthes 3). Also, it should be added an important event in the life of Cortázar, who since young ages knew about the works of Poe as he affirmed in an interview:

at the age of nine I read Edgar Allan Poe for the first time. That book I stole to read because my mother didn't want me to read it, she thought I was too young, and she was right. The book scared me and I was ill for three months, because I believed in it. (Weiss 44)

Therefore, it is not only that he was fully aware of Poe's work, but also the fact that in 1953 Cortázar spent nine months making translations of the short stories and essays of the American writer. Consequently, it seems logical to affirm and it will be taken as a thesis that Cortázar's work is marked and influenced by the writings of Poe. The analysis of Cortázar's work will be done taking into account certain works where the credibility of the character may be questioned and works that resemble Poe's writings.

## **2. The Gothic within Julio Cortázar.**

It is important to frame Cortázar's work within a Gothic theoretical framework. Something that goes beyond small winks to the work of Poe as can be seen in the poem *Soneto Gótico*, in which Cortázar makes a direct reference to Poe's poem *Ligea*. Savoy argues, via Foucault, that "Enlightenment thought characteristically ordered and organized by creating institutions to enforce distinctions between society and its other like the haunted

Gothic castle, the Freudian discourse of self creates the haunted, dark, mysterious space even as attempts to organize and control it" (Martin and Savoy 5 ). Hence, in this theoretical framework, the darkness of the Gothic is born from the interior of the self. And in the stories that have been seen so far by Edgar Allan Poe, that feature is very present. Although there is a factor of defamiliarization with a lot of weight in the narrative of some of the stories, as in the case of *The Fall of The House of Usher* where there is a place beyond the common place for the narrator, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar," (Freud 3676). But although this effect plays an important role in the work of Poe, as it is said in the the origin of the Gothic, previously mentioned, the characters written by Poe are the ones from which the darkness and the unreliability is born, and so the characters written by Cortázar.

When starting with the analysis of Julio Cortázar's work, under a Gothic perspective, *Casa Tomada* will be taken as the first example. In this work, the narrator talks about how he and his sister Irene live together in the house. They inherited it from their parents, and both are the last to live there. There is a Gothic element quite evident with the noises of unknown origin that make the narrator and his sister have to move around the house. But even more, it is the calm with which they assimilate the noises of the house. It can also be mentioned the possible incestuous relationship between the siblings and a possible reference to Poe's life and his marriage to his cousin according to the following sentence: "mostraba una destreza maravillosa y a mí se me iban las horas viéndole las manos como erizos plateados, agujas yendo y viniendo y una o dos canastillas en el suelo donde se agitaban constantemente los ovillos. Era hermoso" (3). Even so, in regard to the content of this analysis, the only thing that will be taken into consideration is the possible incestuous relationship that has appeared in different generations, leading these two brothers to be the last of a family, since the sister has rejected two suitors and they are around forty years old. With the death of both in the future, the house would pass to the hands of distant cousins, leaving the family legacy forgotten in history. It should be noted that echoes of *The Fall of The House of the Usher* appear because it is not only the house that ends up falling down but also the family legacy. With the death of the two brothers, the house will be inherited by two distant cousins, thus the house as a concept beyond the physical aspect, will also disappear.

The narrator who is barely known, beyond the descriptions of the house and the couple of sentences he offers, is the one who both times discovers the noises and the one that makes Irene leave the house. The point of view in the first person, as in the work of Poe, and the mystery that surrounds him leads to doubt the credibility of the narrative he offers. The perception of the reality that the narrator possesses is what alters the focus he has and consequently affects everything that he offers to the reader; César Eduardo Ambriz Aguilar writes: "Si nuestro narrador sale de su casa, no es para acercarse a su realidad, sino para buscar un nuevo modo de evadirla: leyendo literatura francesa."

In this story the reader has to take into account something beyond the relationship between the characters and the outside and it is the house as a concept. Something that is a recurring theme in Gothic literature, and Cortázar makes use of it. As Eric Savoy writes:

If allegory is the strangest house of fiction, haunted by a referentiality that struggles to return in a narrative mode that is committed to repress what it is compelled to shadow forth [...] then it is not surprising that the house is the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American Gothic's allegorical turn. (9)

The following text that exemplifies the influence of Edgar Allan Poe in Cortázar's work will be taken as the short story of the latter entitled *El Móvil*, published in the *Final del Juego* book. In this work, the similarity with Poe and his unreliable narrator is evident and direct, because it is not only a story told with a first person narrator, but from the beginning the narrator warns that the reader will not believe the story, which, as with Poe provokes the loss of credibility and in addition, there is the temporal factor. The narrative happens twenty years after the events happened, thus creating a blur in the past events.

No me lo van a creer, es como en las cintas de biógrafo, las cosas son como vienen y vos las tenés que aceptar, si no te gusta te vas y la plata nadie te la devuelve. Como quien no quiere, ya son veinte años y el asunto está más que prescrito, así que lo voy a contar y el que crea que macaneo se puede ir a freír buñuelos. (Cortázar 60)

This beginning creates a reminiscence of the beginning of *The Black Cat*, where the prisoner warns the reader about the credibility of the story. On that occasion for his mental state and in *Final de Juego* Cortázar accounts for the temporal factor, as in the *Cask of Amontillado*.

Montes, who is the narrator's friend, is killed by a headshot, but he is still able to make a description of the murderer. The only piece of information Montes gave is that the killer has a blue arm and a tattoo, although the last piece of information is not very clear. The narrator himself acknowledges that it is a vague description and under the delirium of a dying person, that is to say it lacks credibility, even though he narrator still builds a revenge from that information.

The story involves revenge, which began with the narrator's friend. However, at the end of the work the narrator murders Pereyra and confesses the crime to Lamas, but the reader can assume that Pereyra was not Montes' killer. The most logical conclusion is that the murder is motivated by the jealousy that the narrator feels when he suspects that the woman with whom he maintained a relationship on the ship may be cheating on him with Pereyra. Therefore, instead of a murder to avenge the death of his friend, there is a crime of passion. Thus, as it happens in *Cask of Amontillado* and *Hop-Frog*, the murderer in the story, gets away with the crime whose motive was revenge.

At this point, it is worth emphasizing in one of the most present phenomena of Gothic literature: the idea of the double. The phenomenon known as doppelgänger and the fascination and at the same time disgust for the double makes us look for its prototype in the work of Stevenson *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The terror that is born of depersonification and a possible division of the being. An evil self that separates from the self that lives under the

norms and values of society. Or simply a self of which, the being is capable of having conscience as a whole.

Cortázar's *Lejana* is ascribed to most of his stories, faithful to this typical motive of the Gothic tradition of all time that produces terror for "la perdida del propio yo" (Campra 38). In *Lejana* there is a starting point of a great concern of the author: that of two remote spatial points with each other and the physical connections between both remote points, with the consequent division of the self. This idea of the physical division will be repeated in Cortázar's novel: *Rayuela* where the fragmentation will appear physically in the novel itself, making the distinction between "el lado de acá" (254) and "el lado de allá" (12).

It can be said that Cortázar introduced the theme of demonic possession within the doppelgänger motive. It is the case of the stories "Las Armas Secretas", with the metempsychosis of the German soldier in the young Frenchman, or "Los Pasos en las Huellas" and "Segundo Viaje", with the demonic possession of an author and a boxer respectively by others deceased. It is the topic of the return of the dead who demand revenge or peace with the help of the living, much explored by Gothic literature.

This double theme is also explored by Poe in his works. Such is the case of "William Wilson" short story, in which a second self appears when the protagonist performs an unethical or evil act. In this case the doppelgänger proposed by Poe is separated from the theory proposed in Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in which the double appears to perform the evil action, without any type of trigger.

### **3. Conclusion**

All in all, although it is true that at the beginning of the essay it was commented that Poe's life and his close relationship with the creation of his characters had to be emphasized, at this point it is notorious to mention Barthes's work in *The Death of the Author*. He redefined the concept of author with an analysis where he explained that writing is an act of reconstructing, of reforming previous texts that belong to culture. This is where the author dies. An author tries to appropriate some cultural ideas, updating stories of the past, showing his own point of view. For the interpretation to be made, the author must disappear.

The point I would like to reach by mentioning Barthes's work is that the author at the time of writing takes a series of cultural universals and rebuilds them. Likewise, a series of works have been seen throughout this essay, which, in my view, fit perfectly with this theory. While on the one hand we have the work of Poe as a literary canon and on the other hand the work of Cortázar. Thus, if Cortázar's writings are analysed, the reconstruction of many of Poe's works can be found, as it has been seen along the essay. Not only finding one-to-one references in both texts but also a clear direct influence from the Gothic writer to Julio Cortázar. Literary texts therefore cannot be understood as isolated works from each other. As you can find the influences of the sacred texts in the literature of the 19th century, or for example the parallels in the journey of the hero as Campbell wrote; it can be concluded that Poe's influence in Latin American literature is highly significant.

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